SOFTWARE FAQ

Q What is disk imaging, and how does it differ from a normal backup?

A A normal backup simply copies your files and saves them to a different location. It doesn't record any extra data, such as the size of the disk partition it came from. If your system fails and you have to replace your hard disk, you'll have to reinstall Windows and all your applications before you can restore your files.

Disk-imaging software is different. It makes a complete copy of the hard disk or partition you want to back up and saves everything, including the files, the partition's file format and all your operating system files. If the system fails or you have to replace the hard disk, you can restore the image and your PC will boot your exact copy of Windows, complete with all your applications and settings.

Disk-imaging programs let you back up your entire system

As you're making a complete backup of your hard disk, disk images are huge, even with compression. You'll need a spare hard disk or some blank DVDs to make backups with one of these applications. Still, imaging is easier to use than traditional backup software, and new versions, such as Symantec's Norton Ghost 10 (see our review on page 60), can create incremental backups. Once you've made one image of your hard disk, subsequent backups copy only new files or those that have changed since the previous backup.

Q I've noticed that some companies sell old versions of software, such as last year's Encyclopædia Britannica. Why would I want old software?

A Some companies, such as Focus Multimedia, acquire the rights to older versions of current software and sell it for less, usually around £15. While last year's version of an application may not have all the bells and whistles of the new version, it's probably still good enough for most people. Take the Encyclopædia Britannica, for example. Most of the information in the 2005 edition will be the same as the 2006 edition, so it's still worthwhile if you're interested in historical events.

Unless you need the new features of a new application, you can save a lot of money by buying the older version. Don't forget we've got archived reviews of older versions of software on our website (*www.computershopper.co.uk*), which you can read to see if they're any good.

david@computershopper.co.uk

REVIEW MUSIC PRODUCTION

CAKEWALK
Sonar 5 Producer Edition

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £329 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.cakewalk.com

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

Sonar 4 was our top recommendation for audio recording and mixing on the PC in *What's New, Shopper* February 2005. Ableton Live may be a better choice for electronic music production and PC-based composition, but for recording pre-written songs, perhaps with a live band, Sonar is the natural choice with its superior handling of multiple takes, fine-level audio editing, flexible mix architecture and superb collection of effects.

That's not to say Sonar isn't well equipped for PC-based composition, too. It can loop and slice samples automatically, unleashing the potential in sample libraries and allowing you to create all sorts of unusual electronic noises. This is a great start, but Sonar 5 introduces lots of new tools and toys for electronic music production.

Top billing goes to Pentagon I, a virtual analogue synth that sounds as huge and intimidating as its control panel looks. It isn't the easiest introduction to subtractive synthesis, but nerds will love it. Psyn II, another virtual analogue synth, is marginally more approachable and sounds sufficiently different to justify its inclusion. Roland Groovesynth specialises in retro hip hop sounds, while RXP and Cyclone provide two different approaches to drum sampling. The high-quality General MIDI synth from version 4 is also included.

LIVE AID

Sonar is a superb self-contained production environment, but those working with live recordings aren't left out. V-Vocal is a sound processor, which, at its simplest, performs AutoTune-style automatic pitch correction, giving vocals that boy-band pop sheen or the Cher *Do You Believe?* effect. It's easier to use than AutoTune, though, and its scope for radically altering performances is far greater. You can draw in entirely new melodies, change the timing and draw volume curves and even formant curves, altering the apparent size of the singer from pixie to giant without changing the pitch.

Pitch and formant effects work only on vocal and other monophonic recordings, but you can adjust the timing and volume of any sound, providing another way to mangle samples. The only downside is that clips with V-Vocal processing can't be split or faded in and out, which is a little strange.

Roland Variphrase processing does everything from pitch correction to complete reworking of melodies

Sonar handles a wide range of audio production tasks from MIDI and audio recording to synthesis and mixing

The new bundled synths sound great and make Sonar much more of a self-contained package

Sonar's effects library was strong, but the new Perfect Space reverb plug-in raises it well above the standard of its competitors. It uses a technique called convolution to apply reverberation from impulses recorded in real acoustic spaces and from premium hardware effect processors. It's extremely processor-intensive, especially at low latency settings, but the results are convincing; it really seems to place sound in a church, a cave or inside a piano, rather than just applying a church effect.

Other new features include the ability to apply effects to a clip rather than an entire mixer channel, which is great for those with experimental mixing techniques. These can be applied non-destructively to allow further tweaking, or destructively to conserve processing power. However, applying effects non-destructively uses processing power constantly rather than just while the clip is playing. As a result, duplicating a clip with effects too many times will cause playback to grind to a halt.

Real-time performance gets a boost from 64-bit Windows support, giving a claimed 20 to 30 per cent performance increase. Sixty-four-bit sound card drivers are rare, as are 64-bit copies of Windows, but it's good to see Cakewalk embracing this new technology. Mixes are performed with 64-bit audio streams (regardless of the Windows version), giving superb audio fidelity, though the 32-bit mixing in rival programs is by no means coarse.

Sonar 5's new features boost its prowess for electronic production and radical manipulation, and while Ableton Live has some superb tricks and Cubase SX's interface is more elegant, Sonar offers the most versatile toolbox for music producers of all persuasions. It's also one of the easiest to use.

Ben Pitt

✔ Comprehensive audio and MIDI production program; vastly improved plug-in bundle

✘ Interface looks cluttered; effects performance could be better optimised

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 1.3GHz Pentium 4 processor (2.8GHz recommended), 128MB RAM (512MB recommended), 100MB disk space, WDM or ASIO sound card

REVIEW MUSIC NOTATION

MAKEMUSIC
Finale 2006

RATING ★★★
PRICE £299 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.finalemusic.com

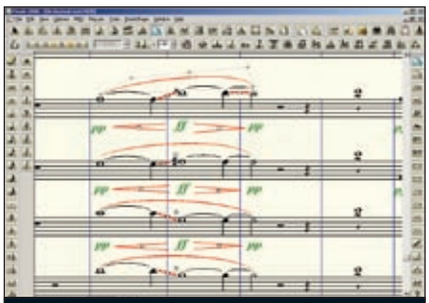
Computers lend themselves well to music notation. Scores must adhere to a lot of esoteric rules, but software can be programmed to ensure these rules are met. However, while many MIDI-sequencing packages display and print scores, the presentation is often scruffy. Finale has been a frontrunner in professional score production for almost two decades, providing classy automatic layouts and tremendous scope for customisation. But it needed to pull out all the stops to compete with Sibelius 4, which we reviewed in *What's New*, *Shopper* December 2005.

Finale 2006 leaves nothing to be desired in terms of score styles and formatting options. It handles lyrics elegantly, even when adding multiple sets of lyrics to a single melody for alternate verses. There's support for guitar tablature, percussion staves, a wide range of extended technique markings and just about anything else you could hope for, except the odd obscurity such as proportional timing. We particularly like the extent to which slurs can be customised, with handles to adjust position, angle and curvature while maintaining a neat, parabolic shape. This level of control is common throughout the software.

The bundled software synth provides realistic playback of complicated orchestral scores

The downside of Finale's comprehensive options is that it isn't quick to learn. Many functions are well implemented, but new users are unlikely to figure them out by trial and error. The narrated Flash tutorials are a great help, but more than once we had to refer to tutorials we had already viewed, as some functions require long sequences of menu delving and keyboard-and-mouse actions. The interface also has some odd quirks. For example, if you use the Eraser to delete notes, the remaining notes in the bar shuffle forward, and there's no warning when you exceed an instrument's range.

The latest version of Finale comes with a good smattering of new features, the most interesting of which is an improved integrated synthesiser for score playback. This draws its sounds from the acclaimed Garritan Personal Orchestra sample library and, with the addition of a new reverb effect and some excellent interpretation of performance markings, playback quality is very high. Up to 64 instruments can be used at once, which is a vast improvement over the eight instruments available in Sibelius's built-in synth. However, Finale's new library omits non-orchestral instruments such as


Dynamics and expression markings have impressive scope for customisation in Finale 2006

guitar and saxophone, and it can't be used in tandem with the older synth, which isn't as high quality but has a wider range of instruments.

Finale 2006 is a worthwhile update to an extremely capable program, but ultimately it can't compete with Sibelius for ease and speed of use. Both programs offer comprehensive formatting options, but Finale leaves the user to find the right tool and know how to use it, while the scores in Sibelius are manipulated by clicking and dragging, which means faster editing and a shallower learning curve. Sibelius is more expensive at around £450 including VAT, but the more polished interface and ingenious timesavers such as the Dynamic Parts function make it worth the extra expense.

Ben Pitt

✔ Comprehensive notation tools; competitive price

✘ Requires plenty of time and patience to use efficiently

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 256MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space

HOTLIST OFFICE SUITE

MICROSOFT
Works Suite 2006

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £69 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com/workssuite

Microsoft Office may be the obvious choice of office suite, but it's expensive for home users and a little business-focused. Microsoft has a more home-friendly range of software in Works Suite 2006, and all for less than £100.

The package contains Word, Digital Image Standard, Money, AutoRoute Essentials, Encarta

and the organiser that glues them all together, Works. However, you get the older 2002 version of Word rather than the newer Word 2003. As the new version provides better security, more options for tracking document changes and mark-up features used to prepare content for professional databases, the presence of Word 2002 is a disappointment.

The other packages are well worth the money, though, and provide pretty much every function the average home user will need. Unless you intend to use your PC to run a small business, Works Suite is a stunning collection of software at a bargain price.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE or later, 700MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space, Internet Explorer 6. **Product code** B11-01360

HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

SONY
Vegas Movie Studio +DVD Platinum Edition 6

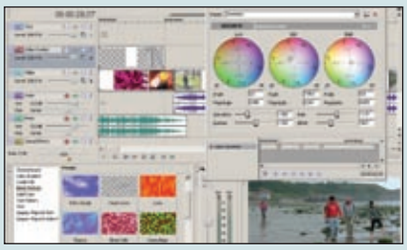
BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £99 inc VAT
SUPPLIER SCV London 020 8418 1470
DETAILS www.sonymediasoftware.com

Platinum Edition is new to the Vegas family and adds support for High-Definition Video (HDV) cameras. With a range of new effects over the standard edition, including the excellent Colour Corrector, it's well worth the extra £15.

Movie Studio has finally caught up and even surpassed its rival, Adobe's Premiere Elements.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space. **Product code** SPVMSDV6000



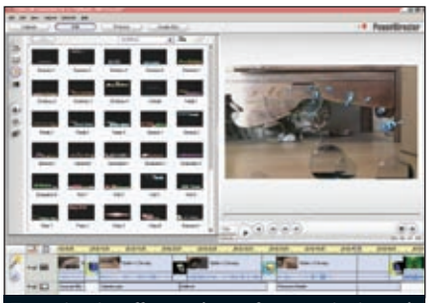
REVIEW VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

CYBERLINK PowerDirector 5

RATING ★★
PRICE £64 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.cyberlink.com
DETAILS www.cyberlink.com

It has been only five months since we reviewed PowerDirector 4, but already CyberLink has released a new version. The last version's beginner-friendly approach meant it lacked power even for casual use – and more capable editors such as Sony's Vegas Movie Studio and Adobe Premiere Elements were easier for beginners, anyway. Has CyberLink managed to address these issues in so little time?

The introduction of high-definition (HD) support is a good start. Capturing from HDV cameras is as easy as it is from conventional DV cameras. Footage is saved in MPEG2 format, which keeps things straightforward but it means the preview window is slow to update when jumping to points on the timeline. See the feature on page 220 and the advanced video software review on page 200 to find out how other software handles HDV more efficiently. HD brings with it support for widescreen, which is also available for standard definition (SD) projects. HD, SD, wide-aspect and normal-aspect footage can all be mixed on the same timeline. However, expanding a video clip to a widescreen aspect ratio uses the only available effect slot, and you can't switch aspect ratios halfway through a project.

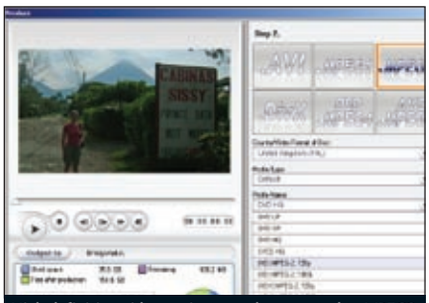


Text animation offers good scope for customisation and the results look excellent

The main editing tools now include a Magic Fix function for correcting shaky camerawork. It fixed subtle shakes well, but applying it to more problematic footage resulted in a loss of detail. Magic Style slaps an introductory sequence and, occasionally, an effect on a clip, but the supplied themes are quite naff. Best of the new features is the animated text. There are plenty of templates, but you can choose your own font, colour, shadow, border and start and end animations for each word, incorporate image files and set how long the text is static between its animated entry and exit.

Otherwise, the Edit mode is regrettably similar to that of version 4. There are a few more options for customising effects, but they still look gimmicky, with no key frame editing and abrupt start and end points, regardless of any transitions you apply to the source footage. PowerDirector's distinction between Clip and Movie editing wastes time, as does the sluggish response, even on a fast PC.

HD projects can be exported in MPEG2 or WMV HD formats, but AVC MPEG4 output requires an £11 upgrade. Sadly, HDV footage can't be exported back to tape. SD output has



High definition video projects can be exported to MPEG2 or WMV format, but MPEG4 support costs more

additional export options including DivX, RealMedia and QuickTime, while PlayStation Portable-compatible MPEG4 is a £16 optional extra. DVD authoring is reasonably well catered for by the template-driven authoring module.

Aside from the impressive text animation and patchy implementation of HDV, not much has changed since we last reviewed PowerDirector. In fact, HDV support serves only to emphasise the software's failings. Anyone who is enthusiastic enough about video to spend more than £1,000 on an HDV camera won't want to put up with such a basic, awkward editor. Neither should anyone else, for that matter.

Ben Pitt

✔ HD support at a low price; easy to understand

✘ Woefully underpowered; sluggish interface

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 2.2GHz Pentium 4 processor (3GHz for HD), 256MB RAM (512MB recommended), 5GB disk space. **Product code** 300050887

HOTLIST INTERNET SECURITY SOFTWARE

STEGANOS Internet Security 2006

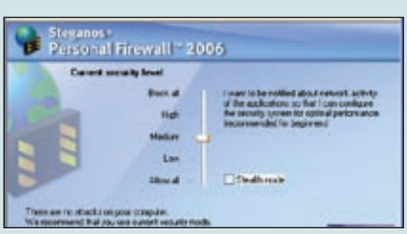
BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £35 inc VAT
SUPPLIER Steganos 00800 78342667
DETAILS www.staganos.co.uk

Steganos's Internet Security suite is a comprehensive bundle of utilities that aims to protect your computer against the main threats on the internet: viruses, hackers, spyware and spam.

The suite is a collection of separate applications that have been licensed individually from other developers. What's more, they all work really well. This package is an absolute bargain and is all you need to protect your PC.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space



HOTLIST PC RECOVERY

INVOLUTION RecoverPC

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £100 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.thecoolingshop.com
DETAILS www.recoverpc.com

When your PC goes catastrophically wrong and you can't even start Windows, RecoverPC can help. This PCI card fits into a free slot and lets you access a hidden partition. A few seconds later, you'll be able to restore your PC to a working state.

It's amazingly quick, works really well and is good value. But make sure you back up your documents regularly or they'll be overwritten.

REQUIREMENTS Free PCI slot. **Product code** 5060094150000

HOTLIST MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

ABLETON Live 5

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £265 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.gear4music.com
DETAILS www.ableton.com

Ableton Live is an extraordinary piece of software, designed to help you produce your live performance. Its excellent Session View lets you trigger recorded clips on the fly, making the software more of an instrument than a recording platform. If you plan to perform on stage, there's no better choice than Live.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz processor, 512MB RAM. **Product code** 28683

REVIEW MIND-MAPPING SOFTWARE

MINDJET
MindManager Pro 6

RATING ★★★
PRICE £234 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.mindjet.co.uk
DETAILS www.mindjet.co.uk

Mind maps – or spider diagrams, as they're often known – are an invaluable tool for sketching out new ideas and planning projects. They work brilliantly with just a piece of paper and a pen, so you may be wondering why you should shell out for a computerised version such as Mindjet's MindManager Pro 6. For a start, computers are a lot more flexible. As well as letting you draw complex diagrams that would swamp a piece of paper, MindManager lets you drag and move central ideas around the page, which you simply can't do with traditional methods.

The screen layout is very easy to read, and within a few clicks you can build a substantial diagram. Mindjet provides a quick tutorial that rushes through the basics, so there's no reason why you shouldn't be using the product successfully within minutes of starting it. Each topic you create can be prioritised, and you can add notes, web addresses and even pictures if you wish. While it's true that you can do the same sort of work in a diagramming package such as Microsoft's Visio, MindManager's relationship tracking makes it much easier to reorganise a diagram, turning a sub-topic into a main topic, for example.

Mindmanager Pro 6 helps you develop your ideas and shape them into a plan, while integration with Outlook lets you put them into action

However, MindManager could do with better context-sensitive menus. For example, right-clicking a main topic lets you add additional information such as notes to the topic, but you can't add a sub-topic in this way. Instead you have to use the keyboard short cut or resort to the toolbar. Fortunately, the keyboard short cuts have been fixed since the last version, so the same key inserts a new main topic and sub-topic depending on the current object you have selected.

Where MindManager really proves itself is with its Microsoft Office integration. For a start, it lets you import and export files from Word, PowerPoint, Publisher and Excel. By linking this information together, you can reuse existing documents and see changes to them reflected in your diagram.

The really exciting part of the program is Outlook integration. You can create new topics that are Outlook Tasks or Appointments. If you have an Exchange server, you can assign people to these tasks and appointments, adding a degree of work control to your plan. Existing topics can be sent to Outlook to become Tasks or Appointments. Unfortunately, this wiped out the notes we'd already typed when we tried it. As Outlook has space for notes, we'd have liked this information to be carried over.

Once you've created an Outlook object, the data remains linked, so any updates and changes you make in Outlook are reflected in your diagram. Mindjet also sells a Basic version of MindManager that doesn't include the Microsoft Office integration for £50 less. Considering how good the Office integration is, though, this doesn't seem like a very good deal.

MindMananger Pro does a good job of getting your ideas from your head to the screen. It is expensive, though, and is still essentially a business tool, with multi-user collaboration features that enable teams to work together on the same project.

David Ludlow

✔ Quick to learn; complex diagrams can be rendered easily; excellent Office integration

✘ Expensive; doesn't import notes into Outlook

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 700MHz Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 150MB disk space

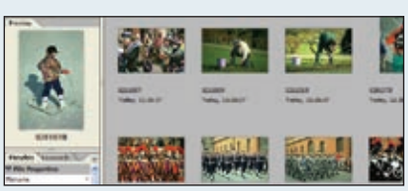
HOTLIST CREATIVE & DESIGN SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Creative Suite 2

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE Standard edition £786 inc VAT (upgrade £375); Premium edition £1,040 inc VAT (upgrade £500)
SUPPLIER Adobe 0131 458 6842
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Creative Suite 2 is a superb bundle of high-end products that includes Photoshop, InDesign and Live Trace. The applications complement each other and are all neatly tied together under a single interface. Each application also features a range of new tools, such as Photoshop's Vanishing Point tool, which makes photo editing in perspective much easier. This suite is great value compared with the standalone prices.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP with QuickTime 6.5, 500MHz processor (1GHz recommended), 384MB RAM (1GB recommended), 2.5GB disk space



HOTLIST WEB DESIGN SOFTWARE

MACROMEDIA
Dreamweaver 8

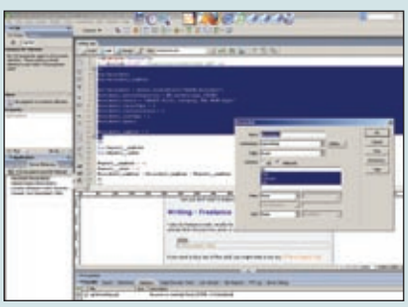
MOST DESIRABLE COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £316 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.macromedia.com

PRICE CUT

If you have anything to do with developing professional websites, Dreamweaver 8 is the best £400 you'll ever spend. Miles ahead of the competition, it has everything. Whether you design the look of a site or incorporate dynamic data, Dreamweaver has the tools you need. It's too expensive for the home user, though.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 650MB disk space, 1,024x768-pixel display



HOTLIST DTP SOFTWARE

SERIF
PagePlus 11

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £100 inc VAT
SUPPLIER Serif 0800 376 7070
DETAILS www.serif.com

The latest version of Serif's PagePlus maintains the high quality set by previous incarnations. The best new feature is the ability to work directly with PDFs, which you can open, edit and save just as if they were native PagePlus documents.

The program also handles missing fonts well, which is an excellent feature for anyone who swaps and shares lots of documents. A tidy new user interface rounds off an excellent package.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 240MB disk space

REVIEW CAD SOFTWARE

CAD SOFTWARE
TurboCAD Designer 11

RATING ★★★
PRICE £30 inc VAT
SUPPLIER Avanquest 01752 895100
DETAILS www.avanquest.co.uk

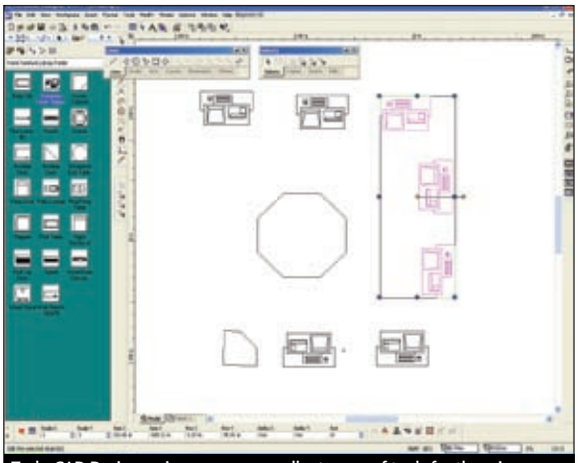
The TurboCAD range of products is popular with many engineers, architects and other technically oriented designers who need to produce blueprints and technical drawings. There are several versions of TurboCAD, ranging in price from £250 to less than £50, and TurboCAD Designer is the baby of the group. It costs just £30, and is aimed at beginners and hobbyists who might want to use it to design a new layout for their home or office

There's no denying that TurboCAD Designer is great value. It's packed with precise and versatile drawing and design tools that enable you to create complex technical drawings. It offers dozens of options for drawing geometric shapes such as rectangles, polygons, circles and sets of concentric circles. There are tools for creating arcs that span precise angles, for drawing freehand or mathematically defined (bezier) curves and for grouping and combining objects to create more complex drawings. This program also has some extremely useful time-saving options, such as the ability to display automatically the dimensions of objects that you draw. This is great whether you're a designer facing a deadline or you're simply trying to figure out how many desks you can squeeze into your new office. All the tools work well, and for the price they're an absolute steal.

People with CAD experience will feel right at home with TurboCAD Designer. But beginners, who are the program's target users, are more likely to be baffled by the vast range of tools and the dense manual. A few tutorials are provided on CD-ROM, but they're too perfunctory to explain in any detail how the program works. Additional tutorials are available on the TurboCAD website, but if users have to root around on the internet before they can even get started, that's an admission that the program is not suitable for beginners.

The interface is also erratic and badly behaved. The program starts in its normal mode, which is awash with a confusing array of tools. We noticed a button in the main menu bar marked Beginner UI, which seemed to convert the user interface into a less-crowded beginner mode. Sadly, the manual didn't mention this button or explain the differences between the two modes, and after clicking it we couldn't figure out how to switch back to normal mode.

We experienced other interface problems, such as the non-appearance of the Symbols palette, which displays ready-made drawings for various items of furniture and technical equipment. This would sometimes appear onscreen but was often obscured by other palettes or toolbars. Only by clicking randomly around the edges of the screen were we able to make it pop back into sight.


TurboCAD Designer gives users an excellent range of tools for the price, but the confusing interface makes it unsuitable for beginners

TurboCAD Designer is an extremely competent CAD drawing tool with an impressive range of tools for a very reasonable price, but the developer's attempts to tailor it for beginners haven't worked. It remains very much a tool for people who already have some experience of CAD or technical illustration work.

Cliff Joseph

✔ Powerful, versatile CAD drawing tools for an excellent price

✘ Requires previous CAD experience; difficult to switch between modes

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 220MB disk space

HOTLIST REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE

3AM LABS
LogMeIn

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE Free; Professional edition $13 (around £7) per month
SUPPLIER www.3amlabs.com
DETAILS www.logmein.com

If you have ever needed to access your PC while you've been away, LogMeIn is just the software for you. The free version gives you full remote control of your PC over the internet and works brilliantly.

The Professional version adds support for file transfers and guest invitations, and lets you use email to send links to files on your PC. It's an excellent piece of software for anyone who does a lot of remote work.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Internet Explorer, broadband internet connection

HOTLIST WEB BROWSER

MOZILLA
Firefox 1.0

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE Free
SUPPLIER www.getfirefox.com

Firefox 1.0 is by far the best web browser we've ever used. Introducing advanced features such as tabbed browsing and support for RSS feeds, it is leaps and bounds ahead of Internet Explorer. When you also consider that it's better at rendering pages and is free, there's little excuse not to use it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space

HOTLIST PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE

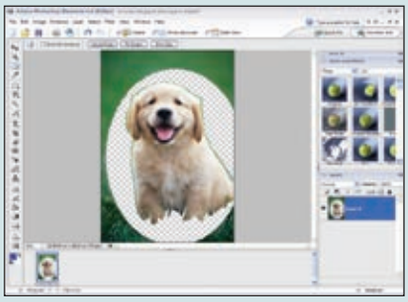
ADOBE
Photoshop Elements 4.0

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £68 inc VAT; upgrade £58
SUPPLIER www.microanvika.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

The latest version of Photoshop Elements blows the competition away. It has stunning new organisation features, including the ability to search for photos that contain people's faces. With the best range of editing features on the market and a low price, this program is one for all photo-editing enthusiasts.

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 800MB disk space. **Product code** AD07071A



REVIEW MUSIC MANAGEMENT

CAKEWALK
Pyro 5

RATING ★★★
PRICE £25 inc VAT
SUPPLIER store.cakewalk.com
DETAILS www.cakewalk.com

Pyro was one of the first programs to enable users to convert music between audio CD, WAV, MP3 and WMA formats. Its streamlined interface made it popular with musicians who wanted a simple music management tool. Since then, free software tools such as iTunes and Windows Media Player have become increasingly sophisticated, but none that we know of can convert freely between all the above formats.

Five versions in, it's good to see that Pyro is still streamlined and uncluttered. A welcome page presents a list of available tasks, and buttons along the top provide direct access to six main areas. The core duties of audio CD burning and ripping are supplemented by data CD and DVD burning, transferring to portable players (where you'll find format conversion tucked away), disc duplication and a new ringtone creation feature.

Pyro 5 supports only MP3 – and not MIDI – ringtones, but they're easy to create from a CD track or music file. Best of all, you can upload your finished files to a server and download them to your phone. This feature is only essential for the few phones that support web access and MP3 ringtones but not USB transfers. Still, it's neatly implemented and makes it easy to share ringtones with friends.

The rest of the software is decent, but unremarkable. You can overlap tracks on an audio CD, but the waveform display is misleading and you have no control over the track ID point. CD ripping includes extensive options for naming tracks, but WMA encoding is fixed at 128Kbit/s.

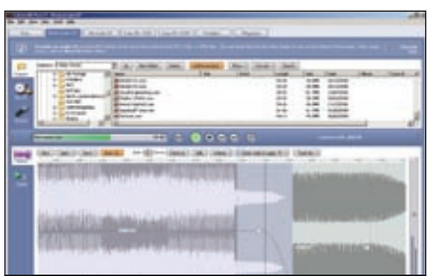
For advanced audio CD creation and file conversion, Magix Audio Cleaning Lab Deluxe, which we reviewed in *What's New*, *Shopper* February 2005, is a better bet. But Pyro's ringtone creator certainly helps keep it in the running.

Ben Pitt

✔ No-nonsense collection of music management tools

✘ Free software handles some tasks better

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz processor (1.5GHz recommended), 128MB RAM (256MB recommended). **Product code** 10-CWPY5.00-10C



Pyro can create CDs with tracks that cross-fade into each other, although you can't control the track ID point

REVIEW MP3 DOWNLOAD SOFTWARE

RADIOTRACKER
Premium

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £20 inc VAT
SUPPLIER Avanquest 01752 895100
DETAILS www.avanquest.co.uk

Finding new music and building a large MP3 collection can be difficult, not to mention expensive. With Radiotracker you can do both for the price of the software. It's designed to scan internet radio stations that broadcast in MP3 format and save the songs to your hard disk.

It doesn't download tracks blindly, though – you have some control over what makes it to your PC. You can select the genre of music you want, so you get only tracks you're likely to be interested in, and also specify a bit rate for MP3s to make sure you don't get any poor-quality files.

Click Start, and the software looks for new tracks and downloads them to your PC. You'll need a broadband internet connection, and you may want to limit downloads to times when you wouldn't normally use your connection, such as while you're at work or late at night, as Radiotracker takes up a lot of bandwidth. While it's working, the status window shows you which tracks it's downloading and from which radio stations. You can select a radio station and listen to it live if you want.

Not all the songs it downloads are saved to your PC, though. The default setting is to save only the 'best' songs, meaning those with the highest-quality bit rate and fewest number of errors. You can change these settings, which are quite complicated, or just opt to save every track. Sadly, Radiotracker doesn't provide a list of tracks it has saved, and you'll have to look through the export folder. This is set to My Music by default, but you can change it if you want.

We were very pleased with the results. All the tracks we downloaded had ID3 tags. Some ended prematurely or had the start of another song at the end, but relatively few did this.

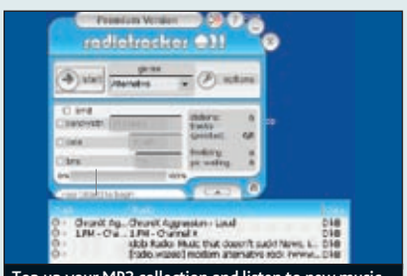
Radiotracker is an excellent way of finding new songs, and it is great value.

David Ludlow

✔ Downloads new music automatically; gets lots of tracks quickly

✘ Can't play downloaded tracks in Radiotracker; some settings are confusing

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space, broadband internet connection



Top up your MP3 collection and listen to new music by scanning internet radio stations automatically

REVIEW TEXT TO VOICE

MAGNETICTIME
MT1

RATING ★★★
PRICE £23 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.magnetictime.com
DETAILS www.magnetictime.com

If you get an avalanche of emails and documents every day and find it hard to read them all, MagneticTime's MT1 could be just what you're looking for. This handy tool turns ordinary text documents into speech, so you can listen to them rather than having to read them.

The software works with manually imported Word documents and, using a rule that installs with the software, Outlook emails. The rule copies all received emails automatically into a MagneticTime email folder, although you can modify it manually so that it selects only the emails you're interested in.

Once you've imported your documents into MT1, there's no way of viewing the text. Instead, double-clicking an email opens the player application. We would have liked the option to view them normally. What's more, the system doesn't deal with attachments, so you have to open each one manually and choose to convert it to speech.

You can use your PC to play back documents and emails if you like, but more useful is the ability to convert them to MP3 format. This enables you to play the recordings on almost any device. Three versions of the product are available, for iTunes, PDA and Mobile Phone. We tested the iPod version, which copies the audio files to your iTunes music directory and adds them to the library and a playlist. Adding a playlist makes it quick and easy to find the file you want on your iPod. However, there's no way of marking the emails to which you wish to reply.

MT1 is supplied with MagneticTime's Platinum voice, which you can hear on the website. It's very clear and sounds like a female voice with a mild American accent. The quality of the voice and translation is high, but we think tighter email integration and better support for attachments would make this a more attractive proposition.

David Ludlow

✔ Clear voice quality; integrates neatly with your portable device

✘ Email integration could be better; doesn't deal with attachments automatically

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 350MHz Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space. **Product code** MT1

Give your eyes a rest and let MagneticTime's MT1 read your text documents and emails aloud to you

REVIEW DISK-IMAGING SOFTWARE

SYMANTEC Norton Ghost 10

BEST BUY COMPUTER SHOPPER

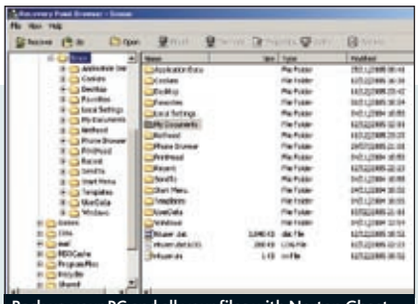
RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £35 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.savastore.com
DETAILS www.symantec.co.uk

No matter how new your PC is or how much you paid for it, there's a chance it will go wrong. Your computer's hard disk stores your programs, all the files your PC needs to load Windows and any documents, pictures, music and other information you've saved. If it fails, you could lose it all.

With this in mind, it's essential that you back up your PC regularly. But backup software can be complicated and many people simply don't bother. You could safeguard just a few critical files by copying them to a CD or a flash memory drive, but you might miss something vital. Norton Ghost is a disk-imaging program that lets you create a complete copy of your hard disk. In the event of a problem, you can restore your PC and all its files to a complete working state. If you should ever have to replace your hard disk, this disk image is all you need to restore your copy of Windows, your applications and all your settings.

Version 10 introduces a lot of new features. Although Ghost still works in the same way, there have been some changes to the user interface and the terminology it uses. Backup images, for example, are now called recovery points. You may hear seasoned Ghost users grumbling about the good old days, but the software is now much easier for novices to understand.

We tested Ghost on a desktop PC and a notebook with 256MB of RAM, but its installer warned us that our notebook didn't meet the memory requirements. We realised this was due to the 16MB its integrated graphics adaptor uses, and we experienced no memory problems during our tests. After installation, Ghost runs an Easy Setup that creates your first recovery point. You can choose to put this on an external hard disk, in a network location such as another PC or even burn it to multiple optical discs. As this process copies the entire contents of your hard disk, it could take some time. Ghost compresses your data by default, but you'll still need a lot of storage space.

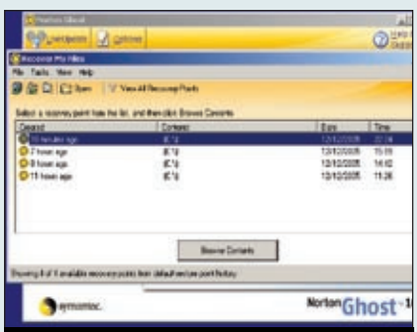

Back up your PC and all your files with Norton Ghost

You can use your PC while Ghost makes an image in the background. If you're using a network storage device, a useful throttle option limits how quickly the program can transmit data, reserving some bandwidth for other data, such as internet traffic. Once you have made a complete backup, Ghost updates only new and changed files in future backups. Such incremental backups are much quicker and take up less room, and the software schedules them to happen daily by default. This is the first version of Ghost that also allows you to use triggers such as logging in and out of Windows to start a backup.

It's possible to restore individual files, folders and even an entire disk from within Windows, but if Windows won't load, you can boot from the Ghost CD. The interface looks similar to Windows and there are tools to help diagnose disk problems and check for a virus infection. Strangely, the system clock on both our test PCs was set back by an hour each time we booted in this way.

Ghost is the best backup product we've tested and is ideal if you're new to backing up. It's powerful but easy to understand and comes with a decent printed manual. If you already have Ghost version 9.0, the incremental backups alone are sufficient reason to make the upgrade.

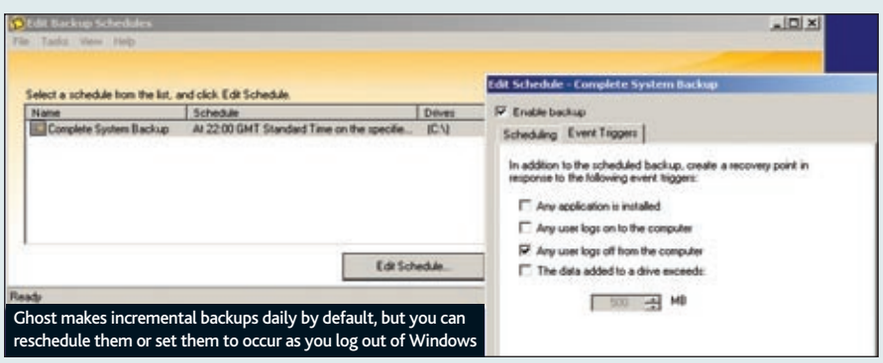
Simon Handby


By selecting a recovery point, you can restore all your programs, files and system settings

✔ Easy to use; powerful

✘ Restore CD changed our system clock

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 300MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 160MB disk space. **Part code**10439689-IN


Ghost makes incremental backups daily by default, but you can reschedule them or set them to occur as you log out of Windows

REVIEW MP3 MANAGER

DATA BECKER MP3 HQ 2.0

RATING ★★
PRICE £20 inc VAT
SUPPLIER Fast Trak 01923 495496
DETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

Both iTunes and Windows Media Player (WMP) offer free, easy-to-use MP3 management, so any application that charges for similar features has to offer a lot more. Data Becker's MP3 HQ 2.0 tries to do just that; it comes with an audio editor and internet radio recorder.

Sadly, while it adds extra features, it lacks the simplicity that iTunes and WMP have in spades. First, the installation process doesn't install an MP3 encoder automatically. The first time you run the application, it searches your hard disk for the Lame encoder. This took around 10 minutes on our test PC, eventually failing. MP3 HQ then downloaded it automatically, but it would have been better to provide this essential program with the software. MP3 HQ manages and organises your music collection and even imports existing music files. The interface isn't as neat as iTunes' or WMP's, though, so it's harder to find a specific track.

As well as dealing with existing tracks, you can import CDs, downloading track information automatically from the net. For each CD you import, you can choose the format – MP3, OGG or WMA – and the bit rate. It's not as simple as iTunes or WMP, which store your preference and import CDs without prompting for the format or quality.

The separate Web Radio Recorder application streams internet radio on to your PC so you can listen to it later. It has a timed record function, but you can set only one schedule per station, so it's no good if you want to record two programmes at different times. Replay Radio (*What's New*, *Shopper* July 2005) does a better job with a complete EPG.

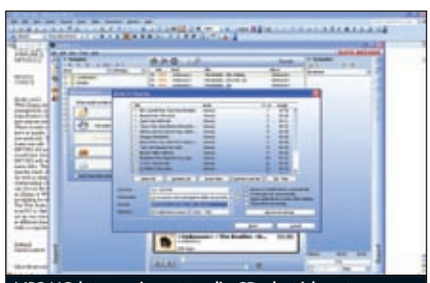
The Audio Editor supports MP3 files, but it's hard to use and provides only basic fade-in and fade-out controls. As both iTunes and WMP provide better functions for free and have online music stores, MP3 HQ 2.0 shows that paid-for applications of this type have had their day.

David Ludlow

✔ Can record internet radio

✘ Harder to use than iTunes and WMP; extra applications not worth the money

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, 500MHz Pentium III processor, 50MB disk space. **Product code** 5032197001572


MP3 HQ lets you import audio CDs, but it's not as easy to use as iTunes or Windows Media Player